

EDUCATION AND ARTISTRY:

The New Pacific Connections Garden Interpretive Shelter

BY ELIZABETH LOUDON

When the first phase of the Pacific Connections Garden (PCG) is completed in spring of 2008, it will feature an interpretive shelter surrounded by entry gardens representing the plants of five regions or countries—Cascadia, New Zealand, Australia, Chile and China. The interpretive shelter’s design and construction were funded by a generous donation of the Pigott Family and, once opened, will provide Arboretum visitors with a fresh new destination and a place for respite from the weather. And since a key feature of the shelter is extensive interpretive signage, this area will become the best-interpreted section of the Arboretum and provide visitors with opportunities for education on plant-related topics.

The Pomegranate Center—a nonprofit community design and development organiza-

tion based in Seattle—was retained to design and build the PCG shelter. The Pomegranate Center’s core mission is to design and build neighborhood gathering places, and its trademark approach includes community involvement and sustainable design.

According to Duncan Chalmers, Pomegranate’s project director, the shelter concept began as “just a [dot] on a plan.” Pomegranate met with the project’s partners—the City of Seattle, University of Washington Botanic Gardens and the Arboretum Foundation—and started working on a design that would reflect the project’s major interpretive theme: the interactions between plants and peoples in each of the five regions or countries represented in the PCG’s entry gardens.

The design evolved through several stages, from a structure featuring five small roofs that

ABOVE: Designs of indigenous peoples inhabiting the five regions represented in the Pacific Connections Garden’s plant collections are carved on the cedar columns that support the Garden’s interpretive shelter. (Designs: The Pomegranate Center)



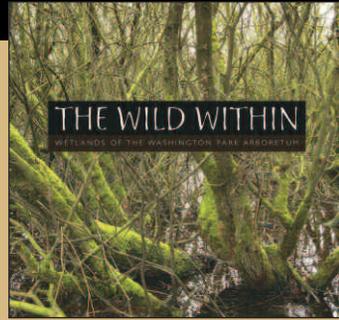
symbolized each of the five entry gardens, to one with a single roof and five pairs of supporting columns, to the final plan, in which a single roof is supported by 12 columns, with three columns located in each corner. The columns are carved with patterns inspired by indigenous cultures living in each of the five regions or countries represented in the entry gardens. In each corner, the main supporting column is carved with patterns representing Cascadia, while the two remaining columns are carved with patterns from one of the other geographical areas.

Cedar trees salvaged from the Arboretum were used for the columns, and volunteers carved them during a series of eight public workshops held in the summer and fall of 2007. The Seattle Times published an article on the carving project (see below), and a carved column also was featured prominently in the Pacific Connections Garden groundbreaking procession and ceremony last October.

Interpretive signage will be integrated into the design of the shelter on a series of eight panels affixed to metal screens between the carved columns; a terrazzo and brass map embedded in the floor will display the Pacific Ocean and the PCG's represented regions or

ABOVE: The Pacific Connections Garden interpretive shelter features a “green” roof, carved cedar columns and educative signage. (Model and photograph: The Portico Group)

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countries. In addition, the shelter will feature a “green” roof.

Design for the interpretation is based on the Arboretum’s “Interpretive and Way-Finding Plan,” a document that provides guidance to develop consistent signage and messages throughout the Arboretum. Although the main signage will be at the shelter, several additional signs on the site that surrounds the shelter will orient visitors and interpret the individual entry gardens. The Portico Group, the Seattle-based consulting firm that is designing the gardens, developed the interpretive signage through consultation with staff from the UW Botanic Gardens, and with additional input from the City of Seattle and the Arboretum Foundation’s Arboretum Botanical Garden Committee. The signs will explore connections between geography, climate, sustainability and culture.

Because there will be such a wide array of plants in the entry gardens, “iconic plants”

have been chosen to represent each country: Western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) for Cascadia; monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*) for Chile; snow gum (*Eucalyptus pauciflora*) for Australia; ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) for China; and New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*) for New Zealand. Each of these iconic plants has special significance in its native region because of its role in the ecosystem, its traditional uses and its unique beauty. Each also tells a story about the importance of plants in its culture and will be depicted in the signage and grown in the entry gardens near the shelter.

The 300-square foot shelter will be located at the northwest corner of the new PCG entry gardens area, at the top of a ridge that faces northwest toward Lake Washington Boulevard. In a subsequent phase of the Pacific Connections Garden project, this site also will be the starting point of a stairway and path that lead visitors through the future



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China collection. The path, which eventually will feature a view to the west, references the Pilgrim's Path, a well-known trail on China's celebrated Mount Omei—the source of many plants in the China collection.

The Arboretum has been called a “well-kept secret,” and the purpose of the new interpretive program is to tell visitors its story as a destination point and as a resource for information on plants. The Arboretum's “Interpretive and Way-Finding Plan” calls for a design principle of unobtrusive signage in keeping with the public's expressed desire to keep the Arboretum looking natural and uncluttered.

According to the Plan, “Interpretation can help accomplish the Arboretum's mission, build a knowledgeable constituency for supporting the Arboretum's goals, encourage a sense of stewardship within regular visitors, and help make a difference in how we conserve the natural world. Interpretation

encourages curiosity and provokes thought.”

The Arboretum's goal is to have interpretive shelter visitors come away with a new sense of connection to the plants they encounter in our community, the Arboretum and the Pacific Connections Garden. This goal will be achieved in large part through the educative function of the shelter's interpretive signage and the artistry of the shelter's design. ☺

ELIZABETH LOUDON is education and outreach manager at the University of Washington Botanic Gardens. She acts as lead for interpretation and communications for the Pacific Connections Garden.

For further information:

“Sprucing Up a Place for Plants,” The Seattle Times, Oct 7, 2007.

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THANK YOU, DAVID!

The Arboretum Foundation would like to thank

David Mabberley

for his service and commitment to the Arboretum as Director of the University of Washington Botanic Gardens (2005–2008). David has been appointed Keeper of the Herbarium, Library, Art, and Archives at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in London. We wish him all the best in his new position.

The Foundation would also like to welcome Sandra Lier, who will serve as Interim Director of UWBG during the search for David's successor.